Southern Research Report #11

The Natchez District in the Old, Old South

Winter 1998

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The silhouette on the cover is one of the earliest representations of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Cut by Mrs. William Hooper in 1814, it is part of the Graves Papers in the Southern Historical Collection. The original silhouette is on display in the Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Department houses not only the Southern Historical Collection, but also the University Archives.

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Edited by

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University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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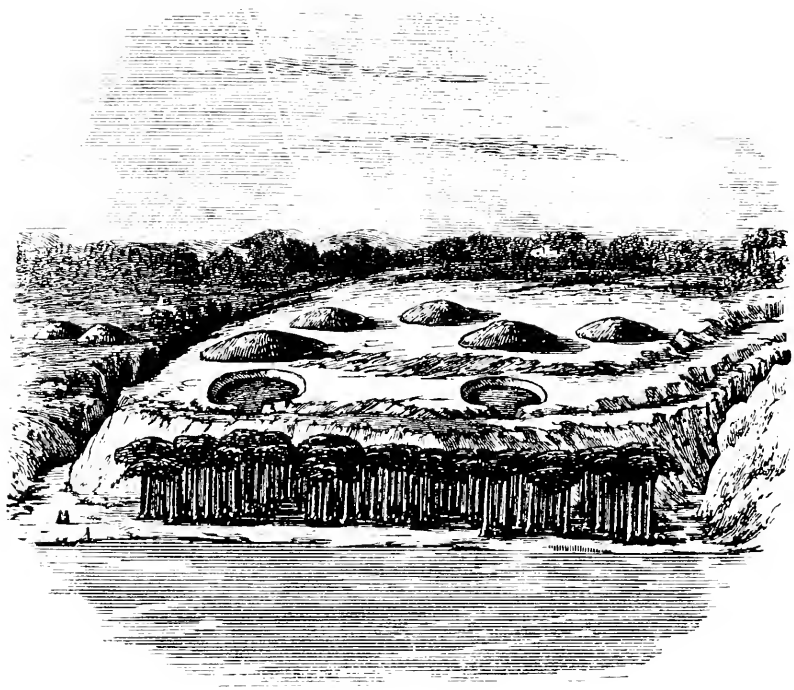


Ancient Indian mounds in the Natchez District located on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, from a drawing made by Montroville W. Dickeson in 1846. (Stewart Culin, The Dickeson Collection of American Antiquities. *Bulletin of the Free Museum of Science and Art of the University of Pennsylvania, vol. 2, no. 3. Philadelphia, 1900.)*

Preface

This small book grew out of a symposium with the same name that was held at the second biennial Historic Natchez Conference in Natchez, Mississippi, on February 3, 1996. In line with the conference's overall theme, "The Natchez District and the Making of the South," the purpose of this symposium was to draw attention to the fact that the South was a distinctive region not only during the period of European settlement, but in precolonial times as well. This distinctiveness was clearly manifested by the Native American cultures that dominated the southern landscape during the centuries leading up to the European invasion.

The papers in this symposium focused on the making of this older South, with particular attention to the Natchez District and its surrounding areas. Individual presenters discussed the history of precolonial Indian cultures in the Lower Mississippi Valley and the South, looking at architecture, economy, social organization—the various domains in which these early Southerners most diverged from their neighbors. After reviewing this evidence, a closing commentary formed a bridge between the precolonial and colonial periods, by considering the reasons for the South's continuing distinctiveness over such a long span of time.

Four of the five original papers are printed here. The first paper, my own contribution, presents in broad outline the South's ancient history as it has been reconstructed by archaeologists. I emphasize the distinctive patterns that characterized the cultures of the South in general, and the Lower Mississippi Valley in particular.

The second paper, by Gayle Fritz, focuses on the history of native agriculture in the South, particularly in the Lower Mississippi Valley. She traces this history from the beginnings of Southern agriculture prior to 2000 BC, to the adoption of intensive maize agriculture after AD 1000. Interestingly, she shows that the Lower Mississippi Valley *lagged* behind the rest of the South in adopting agriculture, perhaps because the richness of its natural environment made it relatively easy to subsist on wild foods.

Next, Ian Brown describes the eighteenth-century Natchez nation, which was perhaps the longest-lived and certainly the best-documented native "chiefdom" in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Such social forms—centralized polities with strong chiefs and hereditary aristocracies—were typical of the South during precolonial times (particularly after A.D 1000), but rapidly collapsed due to disease, warfare, and internal conflict with the onset of European colonization.

And finally, Patricia Galloway considers the question of how and why the regional distinctiveness of the Lower Mississippi Valley persisted over such a long period of time. She concludes that, while environmental factors such as the natural productivity and fertility of the Valley may have played a role, one can only understand such patterns in terms of particular historical contingencies rather than deterministic principles.

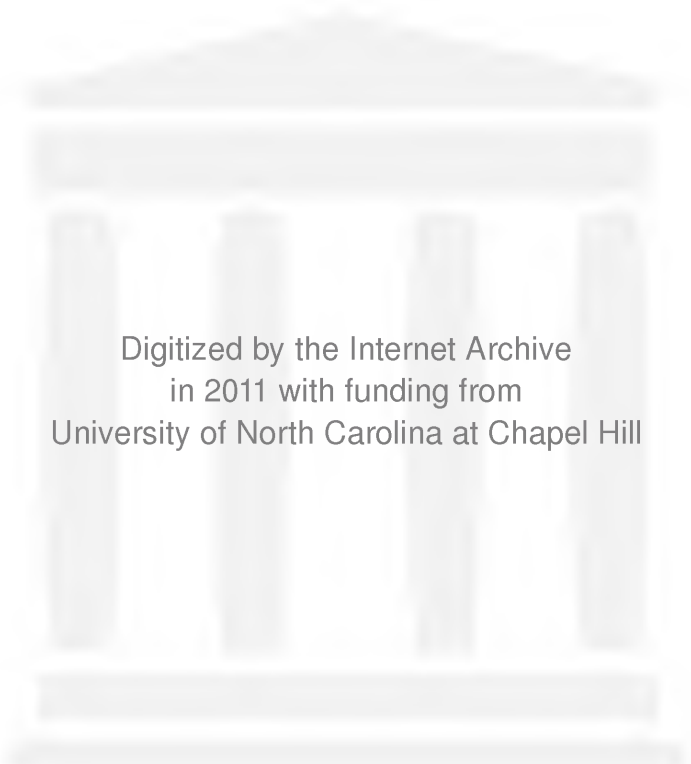
We are grateful to Ron Davis (California State University at Northridge) for inviting us to participate in the Historic Natchez Conference and to David Moltke-Hansen (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) for encouraging us to publish our presentations in their current form. The process of publication was greatly facilitated by the talents of Elizabeth Jones, R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr., and Steven Berry. Support for this volume came from the Center for the Study of the American South, the Academic Affairs Library and its Southern Historical Collection, and the Research Laboratories of Archaeology of the University of North Carolina of Chapel Hill as well as the Randleigh Foundation Trust and the Historic Natchez Foundation.

This is the second number in the *Southern Research Report* series to focus on the old Natchez district. Report #7, *Archival Shadows of the Old Natchez District*, appeared in anticipation of the second biennial Historic Natchez District Conference. It reports the Natchez-area archival holdings of eight institutions from Austin, Texas, to Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Both numbers reflect the collaboration orchestrated by Ron and Mimi Miller of the Historic Natchez Foundation and Ron Davis of California State University at Northridge. These individuals' enthusiasm and dedication have resulted in extraordinary sharing by scholars, students, and Natchez

natives across disciplinary lines and subject interests. All of us who work on or think about Natchez's rich past are the beneficiaries. Such collaborations are too rare.

Vincas P. Steponaitis
Chapel Hill
November 1997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NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES IN THE PRECOLONIAL SOUTH

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Research Laboratories of Archaeology
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Contrary to what many people believe, Southern history does not begin 500 years ago with the Spanish exploration and subsequent incursions by missionaries, traders, and colonists. Rather, the South has a much longer history, one that stretches back at least twelve thousand years (Bense 1994; Smith 1986; Steponaitis 1986). This precolonial, Native history of the South—accessible principally through archaeological research—has been a fruitful area of inquiry for nearly two centuries. Indeed, many early-nineteenth-century residents of the Natchez District—including William Dunbar and Benjamin Wailes—took an active interest in the antiquities of this region and made written observations that are still used by archaeologists today (Kennedy 1994; Sydnor 1938).

My goal here is to review this ancient history in line with the second Historic Natchez Conference's theme, "Becoming Southern in Time and Place." The word "becoming" implies origins, and if we are to consider the origins of "Southernness," we must note that the South was a culturally distinctive region not only during the Colonial and American periods, but in precolonial times as well.

At the time of first contact with Europeans, the Native Americans who lived in the South had a way of life that was recognizably different from that of the Northern and Western tribes. Early on, Euro-American observers recognized this difference by speaking of the Southern tribes as being more "civilized" than the rest. However ethnocentric and inappropriate this description may have been, it did call attention to a very real distinction, which, as we shall see, had very deep historical roots. Later, in the twentieth century, anthropologists codified this distinction by recognizing the South as a "culture area," that is, a geographical unit within which

there was a high degree of cultural uniformity (e.g., Swanton 1946). While scholars have sometimes disagreed over the boundaries of this unit, no one has disputed the unit's existence. Indeed, the boundaries of this older South, what I call the Native South, are remarkably similar to those of the American South as we think of it today (Figure 1).

In the pages that follow, I'll examine two questions that pertain to the origins of this Native South: First, when did a distinctively Southern regional culture first appear? And second, to what extent (and how consistently) did this Southern cultural identity persist through time? While exploring these questions, I will present a brief chronicle of the South's precolonial history, both to familiarize the reader with its major trends and to provide a context for the other papers in this volume. In line with the volume's focus on the Natchez District, I will also pay special attention to developments in the Lower Mississippi Valley, and how these fit within the cultural fabric of the South as a whole.

The human history of the South really begins with the first peopling of North America, which occurred during the last Ice Age. Based on archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence, there is little doubt that this continent's first inhabitants came from Asia (Fagan 1987). They arrived by way of the Bering Strait, which, because of lowered sea-levels during the Ice Age, was largely free of water. In effect, there was a housand-mile-wide "land bridge" connecting Asia with the Americas, a land mass that geologists call Beringia. Exactly when people first arrived by way of this land bridge remains a controversial issue: most archaeologists believe that the first crossing occurred sometime between 25,000 and 12,000 years ago. But whatever position one takes on the timing of the *first* arrival, everyone agrees that human populations were well established here by 12,000 years ago, or 10,000 BC. This is the date at which the most ancient inhabitants of North America crossed the threshold of archaeological visibility and started leaving abundant evidence of their presence, evidence that we can find and interpret today.

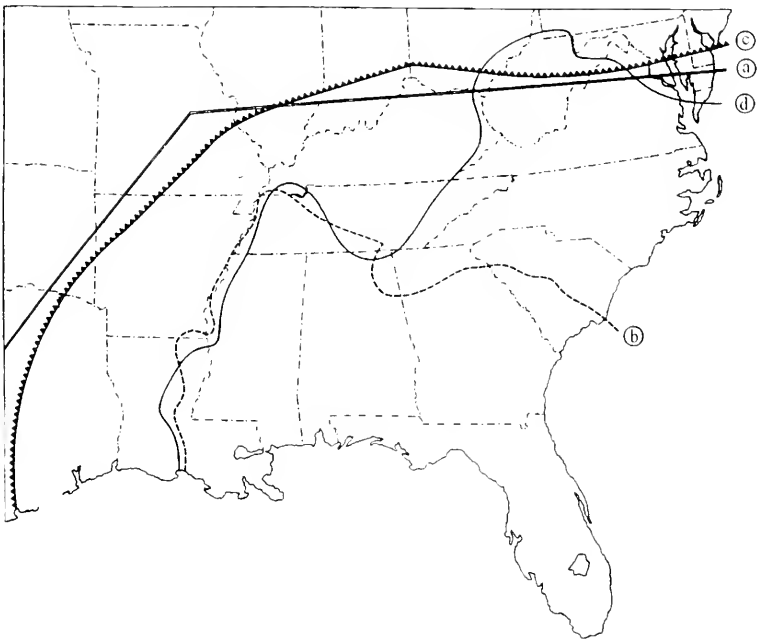

Figure 1. The boundaries of the South as a "culture area" or "ethnological province," based on similarities among Indian cultures at the time of European contact, as defined by various authors: a, *Clark Wissler (1922);* b, *Alfred Kroeber (1939);* c, *John Swanton (1946);* d, *George Murdock (1960). (Adapted from Smith 1986: Figure 1.1.)*

From this date onward, we can trace the history of the South—and its regional distinctiveness—through the four major periods that archaeologists conventionally recognize: Paleoindian (10,000 - 8000 BC), Archaic (8000 - 700 BC), Woodland (700 BC - AD 1000), and Mississippi (AD 1000 - 1500). Each of these periods subsumes a great deal of cultural variation, both temporal and geographical. (We are obviously dealing here with Braudel's *longue durée*—the broad patterns of economic and social history, not a detailed chronicle of individual lives and events.) Nevertheless, despite their great length, these periods provide a convenient frame within which to sketch the outlines of the South's ancient history.

Paleoindian Period

Some twelve thousand years ago, at the start of the Paleoindian period, the South was a very different place than it is today. Ice-age fauna (such as mastodons, ground sloths, and bison) roamed the land. We know that these large animals were occasionally hunted for food. Evidence for the hunting of mastodon and bison have been found at a number of sites from this period, but nowhere more graphically than in the Florida panhandle, where amateur archaeologists found the skull of an Ice-Age bison, with a stone spear-point embedded between the horns (Webb et al. 1984).

We know from archaeological evidence that this Ice-Age landscape was inhabited by groups of foragers who lived off the land. They gathered edible plants, hunted wild game, and fished as opportunities arose. Settlements were relatively small and impermanent, consistent with a nomadic way of life. We believe that population densities were low, social groups were relatively small (say 50-100 people), and that these groups moved over large territories, encompassing many thousands of square kilometers. Evidence of these movements can be seen in the geographical distribution of distinctive types of rock, which were quarried at known sources, made into tools, and eventually discarded hundreds of kilometers from where they originated (Goodyear 1979).

In terms of basic lifeway and artifact styles, perhaps the most striking thing about the Paleoindian period is the uniformity one sees across the entire North American continent. Styles of spear-points and other stone tools used in the South at this time are virtually identical to those found as far north as Canada and as far west as the Pacific coast (Figure 2). The combination of low population density, high mobility, and large territories facilitated sustained communication across vast areas, which made possible the broad cultural similarities so evident in the archaeological record. While there were undoubtedly some regional differences based on the idiosyncracies of local environment, at this early date the Native South as a distinctive *cultural* region had not yet come into being.

Archaic Period

This continental uniformity did not last more than a couple of thousand years (which is not long by archaeological standards). By the beginning of the Archaic period at 8000 BC, we have the first clear evidence for the emergence of a regional culture in the South. This culture, called "Dalton" by archaeologists, was marked by a distinctive spear-point and a tool assemblage that included adzes for heavy-duty woodworking—the first known examples of such tools in North America (Figure 3). The "Southernness" of this culture is clearly evidenced by the archaeological distribution of its artifacts: the geographical extent of this ancient style corresponds closely to our modern conception of the American South, except for an anomalous (and possibly spurious) bulge to the northwest (Justice 1987: Map 12). By this time, the Ice Age had ended, and although these people still foraged for their food, the plants they gathered and the animals they hunted were all species we find in the South's forests today—such as acorns, hickory nuts, and deer.

Artifact styles and lifeways changed continually throughout the Archaic period, resulting in cultural variants far too numerous to discuss individually here. Suffice it to say that, with these changes, the Southern identity first seen in Dalton times waxed and waned a number of times. In general, Southern cultures tended to be different from those found farther north and west, but cultural boundaries shifted in ways that sometimes cross-cut modern regions, particularly the upper South and lower Midwest. In addition, there was a trend toward ever-greater "regionalization." That is, even within a larger cultural region, distinctive subregions became much more clearly distinguishable.

Indeed, by Middle Archaic times the Lower Mississippi Valley had emerged as just such a subregion. Its distinctiveness was expressed not just in artifacts but also in architecture. Around 3400 BC and perhaps even earlier, the people of this valley began building monuments of earth—substantial mounds that marked places of sacred or social importance (Saunders et al. 1997). In recent years, more than a

Figure 2. A stone spearpoint of the "Clovis" type, a style used throughout North America in Paleoindian times. This specimen was found in Durham County, North Carolina. (Photo by I. Randolph Daniel.)

Figure 3. Dalton adzes from the Hardaway site in Stanley County, North Carolina: top, *unfinished adze preforms or blanks;* bottom, *finished adzes. (Courtesy of Research Laboratories of Archaeology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; photo by I. Randolph Daniel.)*

half-dozen mound sites dating to Middle Archaic times have been identified in eastern Louisiana, and many more still remain to be found.

These mounds were built in a variety of configurations. Some, like Watson Brake near the city of Monroe, Louisiana, had multiple mounds in a circular arrangement. Other sites, like Hedgepeth, had fewer mounds, in this case only two (Saunders et al. 1994). The function of these mounds is a mystery. We assume that they were public buildings, with religious and political significance to the people who built them. But exactly what that significance was, we just don't know. However this mystery is eventually resolved, the important thing to remember for now is that these earthen mounds were the earliest in North America by far, and comprised an architectural tradition unique to the Lower Mississippi Valley at this time.

Toward the end of the Archaic period, around 1100 BC, this architectural tradition culminated in one of the largest pre-Columbian earthworks in North America: the Poverty Point site (Figure 4), about 100 kilometers west of Vicksburg (Ford and Webb 1956; Webb 1977). The most obvious feature at this site is a very large mound, about 210 m long at the base and 21 m high. Some believe that its cross-like shape was intended to represent a bird. In addition to this enormous mound, the site contains six concentric earthen ridges, which form a semicircle 1.2 km in diameter. The scale of these ridges is so big that they were not even recognized as artificial constructions until the aerial photos of the site were examined in the 1940s. While the mounds seem to have been purely ceremonial structures, there is good evidence that the ridges were places of habitation.

Interestingly, the people who built Poverty Point still relied on foraging, hunting, and fishing for their basic subsistence (Fritz, this volume). Apparently, the floodplain environment was so rich in wild foods that large concentrations of people could be supported without farming. While plant husbandry and small-scale gardening were already being practiced in some parts of the South and Midwest by 1000 BC, these innovations were relatively slow to be adopted in the Lower Mississippi Valley.

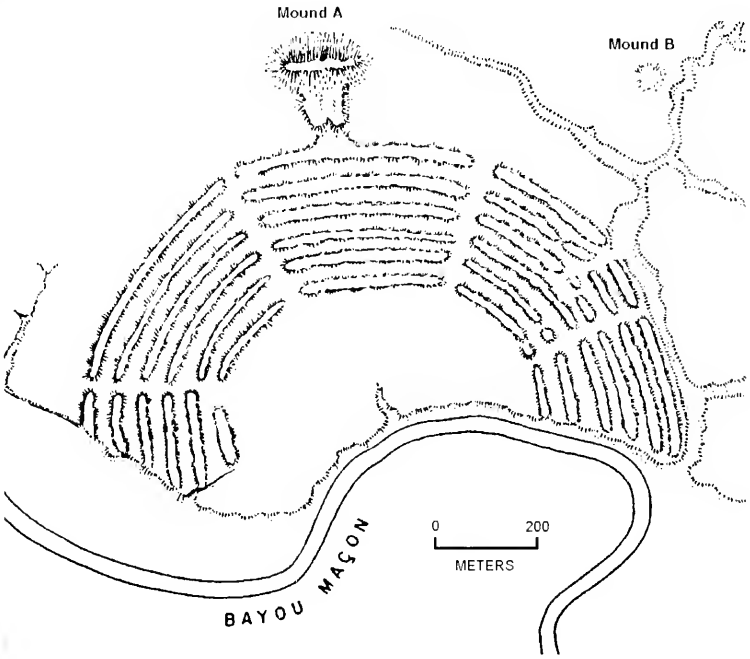

Figure 4. The massive earthworks at Poverty Point, West Carroll Parish, Louisiana. The system of concentric ridges is 1.2 km in diameter. Mound A is 21 m high and more than 200 m long; Mound B is nearly 7 m high and some 60 m in diameter. These earthworks date approximately between 1500 and 500 BC. (Adapted from Ford and Webb 1956: Figure 6.)

Woodland Period

The Woodland Period was a time of considerable change, when agricultural economies spread and gained importance in many parts of the South and Midwest. Initially, the crops were indigenous species (such as squash, goosefoot, marsh elder, and little barley) that were planted in gardens and often domesticated. These crops, however, did not completely supplant wild foods, which continued to be very important. The subsistence ecomony was broad-based, with a mix of farming and gathering, as well as hunting and fishing (Smith 1992).

The practice of building mounds now became ubiquitous

Figure 5. Mound 4 at the Marksville site in Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana. This conical burial mound, which dates to the Middle Woodland period (ca. 100 BC-AD 300), is 6 m high and 30 m across. The wooden fence at the base is a modern construction.

across the Eastern Woodlands. From the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast, and from the Mississippi Valley to the Atlantic shore, a new tradition arose of building mounds over graves or special areas used in ceremonies connected with the dead. These so-called "burial mounds" came in a variety of forms, and were used in a variety of ways (Figure 5). In some places, these mounds were reserved for the tombs of community leaders, who were given elaborate funerals appropriate to their exalted status. Elsewhere, burial mounds seemto have a more communal character, expressing social relations that were more egalitarian. Both types of mounds occurred in the South, and in other regions as well (Steponaitis 1986).

Generally speaking, this was a time of widespread trade and interaction during which the cultural distinctiveness of the South as a whole seemed to dissolve. Or, to put the matter differently, cultural boundaries shifted in a way that made the South less of a discrete entity. With the spread of "Hopewellian" cultures, much of the South became part of a larger cultural sphere that included substantial portions of the Midwest and Northeast.

On the other hand, despite the South's overall "disappear-

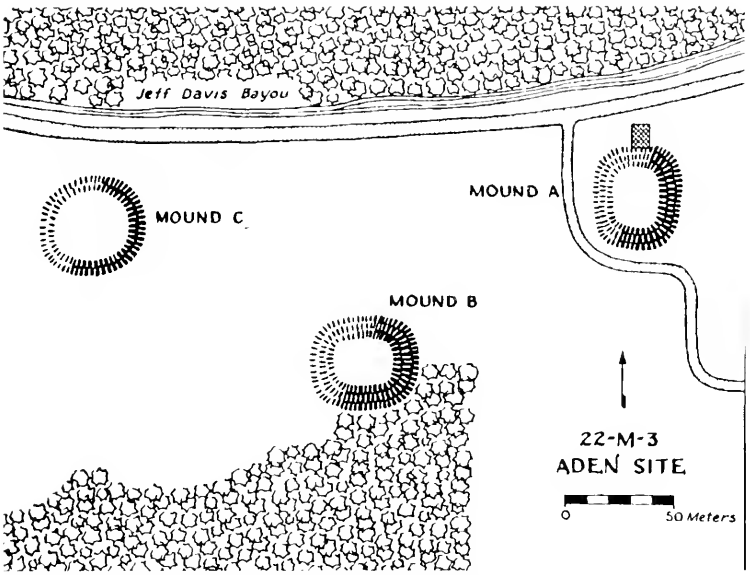

Figure 6. The Aden site, a Coles Creek period (ca. AD 700-1000) mound complex in Issaquena County, Mississippi (after Phillips 1970: Figure 142). The plan consists of three flat-topped, pyramidal mounds arranged around a plaza. When in use, each mound probably had a wooden building on the summit.

ance," the Lower Mississippi Valley and adjacent Gulf Coast continued to remain distinctive. This area was home to the Tchefuncte, Troyville, and Coles Creek cultures (among others)—all of which differed markedly from their northern and eastern contemporaries (Neuman 1984; Williams and Brain 1983). For one thing, their pottery styles were very different (and far more diverse), emphasizing incised geometric designs rather than the paddle stamping that predominated elsewhere. Moreover, public architecture also evolved in a distinctive way, with the appearance (in the Coles Creek culture) of flat-topped mounds with wooden buildings on top—earthworks called "platform mounds." These mounds, sometimes found in groups of two or three, were typically arranged around an open plaza that served as a venue for community ceremonies and politics (Figure 6). As we shall see, this mound-plaza arrangement, which first became common in the Lower Mississippi Valley around AD 700, was soon to spread

across the entire South—yet another instance where the Lower Mississippi Valley was precocious in its public architecture.

Mississippi Period

This brings us to the last stage in the precolonial history of the South, the Mississippi period, which began at AD 1000. This was a time when the cultural identity of the South re-crystallized in the form of the so-called "Mississippian" cultures, which were the ones eventually encountered by Europeans in the sixteenth century. The Mississippian cultural sphere stretched from the Lower Ohio River to the Gulf Coast, which, apart from minor extensions into southern Illinois, largely coincides with the South as we think of it today.

The major characteristics of Mississippian cultures were an intensively agricultural economy, a centralized political organization, and a common set of beliefs and ritual practices that were expressed by similarities in art and public architecture. Let me now briefly discuss each of these features in turn.

Mississippian agriculture was dominated by a single crop—maize—which was planted in large fields and provided up to 50% of the total diet (Figure 7). Other crops included squashes, gourds, tobacco, and a number of the indigenous plants that carried over from earlier times (C. M. Scarry 1993). It is interesting to note that the adoption of intensive maize agriculture was not so much a gradual process as a rapid event. The chemical signature of maize in human bones tells the story: the carbon isotopes associated with maize increased very rapidly around 1000 years ago, suggesting that the shift to intensive maize production happened in any given place within one or two generations at most (Ambrose 1987). It is also interesting to note that this change occurred later in the Lower Mississippi Valley than most everywhere else, not until after AD 1200 (Fritz, this volume).

This agricultural change took place across the entire Eastern U.S.: in the North as well as the South. What made

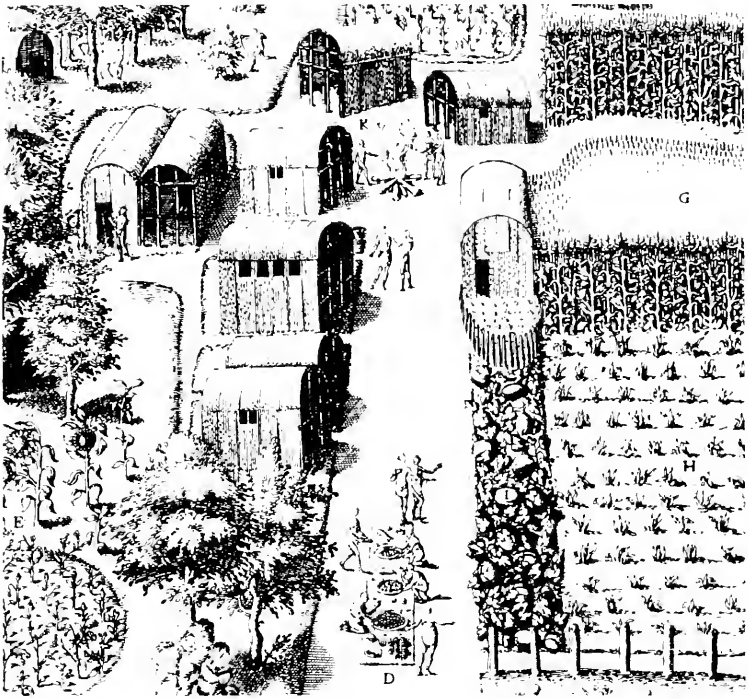

Figure 7. Detail from Theodor De Bry's engraving of the Town of Secota (Hariot 1590: Plate 20), based on a painting by John White made in the 1580s in coastal North Carolina. Note the fields of maize in different states of maturation on the right. At left, De Bry's engraving depicts fields of sunflower and tobacco; although these plants are not depicted in White's original painting (compare Figure 24 and Plate 36 in Hulton 1984), we have abundant archaeological evidence that such crops were grown during the Mississippi period.

the South different, however, were the accompanying changes in society, politics, and ideology. While Northern communities generally remained egalitarian, Southern communities became increasingly hierarchical. The dominant social formation became the chiefdom, with hereditary aristocracies and regional hierarchies of chiefs whose power rested on sacred authority, military prowess, and their practical ability to organize and carry out public works (J. F. Scarry 1996).

The most obvious archaeological manifestation of these new political arrangements was the proliferation of platform mounds across the Southern landscape. These Mississippian

Figure 8. Mound B at the Moundville site in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. This earthen platform is 17 m high and about 75 m square at the base. On its summit is a modern reconstruction of a Mississippian building. The mound was built and used ca. AD 1200-1600.

mounds, like their Coles Creek prototypes, were typically pyramidal in shape and had a flat summit on which a building would be placed (Figure 8). Such buildings could be temples, mortuaries, or the residences of important chiefs. Groups of such mounds, arranged around open plazas, often marked the political and religious capitals of districts encompassing hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of square miles. Among the grandest of mound centers were famous sites like Cahokia in southern Illinois, Moundville in western Alabama, Etowah in northern Georgia, Lake George in the Mississippi Delta, as well as the Anna and Emerald mound sites in the Natchez Bluffs. These sites were undoubtedly built and inhabited by some of the most important political figures in North America during precolonial times.

It is important to stress that these Mississippian mounds were not simply the embodiment of some abstract architectural idea that was passed around and copied as whim and fashion dictated. Rather, in order to understand these mounds, we must view them as being firmly embedded in the context of the societies that produced them. Doing so requires that we appreciate two points. First, we must recognize that Mississip-

pian mounds required enormous amounts of labor to build, and the fact that these monuments were built presupposes the existence of political institutions capable of mobilizing sufficient labor for projects of this scale. Second, we must note that Mississippian mounds were not purely secular structures, but highly charged with religious and symbolic significance (Knight 1989). Not only were such mounds the focal point of community ceremonies, but also the construction of these mounds was almost certainly a ritual act, accompanied by offerings and an appropriate suite of ceremonies (Schnell et al. 1981).

Nor was the domain of politically important symbolic expression confined to architecture. During Mississippian times, there emerged a pan-Southern representational art style, an iconography that has come to be called the "Southeastern Ceremonial Complex" (Galloway 1989). This iconography was embodied in a number of media—shell ornaments, pottery, and stone, to name a few that survive archaeologically—and despite some local idiosyncracies, the thematic content of these representations was remarkably uniform all across the South: we see images of chiefs and priests in full regalia; a plethora of supernatural creatures with attributes of felines, serpents, and birds (Figure 9); and the accoutrements of war, including ceremonial weapons and trophies. While their meanings may be obscure to us, these symbols were understood across the Native South, and doubtless comprised a symbolic *lingua franca* that played a key role in political and religious discourse throughout the Mississippian world.

Despite the overall similarity of Southern cultures at this time, the Lower Mississippi Valley retained a flavor of its own. The culture that developed in this area after AD 1000 is called Plaquemine, and its distinctiveness is such that scholars still debate whether it should be called Mississippian at all (cf. Williams and Brain 1983). This debate, of course, is about terminology rather than substance, and so the position one takes is largely a matter of preference. For present purposes, the important thing to remember is that, while the Lower Mississippi Valley clearly fit within the broader patterns of Southern Indian culture, its pottery styles and ritual practices continued to be noticeably different.

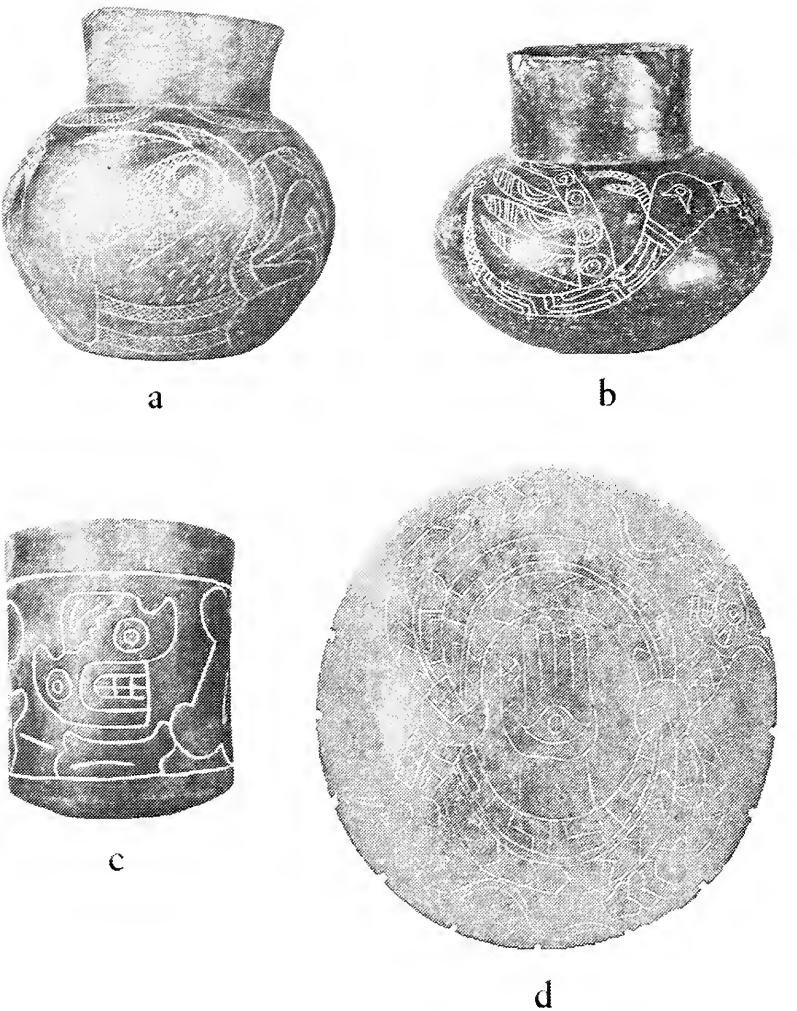

Figure 9. Examples of Mississippian iconography from Moundville, Alabama: a, *ceramic bottle with engraved head of raptor;* b, *bottle with winged serpent;* c, *beaker with human head and longbones;* d, *stone palette with entwined snakes surrounding a "hand-and-eye" motif. (Courtesy of Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.)*

Discussion

In outlining some 12,000 years of Native Southern history, from the Ice Age to the European invasion, I have mentioned only the broadest patterns. But in so doing I hope that I have conveyed the main idea: that the South, as a distinctive *cultural* region, has a much longer existence than historians have conventionally recognized. The earliest archaeological evidence of a distinctively Southern way of life—manifested in the Dalton culture—dates back to 8000 BC. Subsequent millennia saw many shifts in cultural boundaries, during which this Southern identity waxed and waned, and sometimes disappeared altogether. But despite these vicissitudes, the Native South's cultural identity re-crystallized by AD 1000, and persisted until the arrival of the Europeans.

This idea raises some obvious questions. What accounts for this long-standing regional identity, which was present both before and after the European arrival and exists even today? Is it simply happenstance, or can we identify specific historical or environmental processes that explain this phenomenon? I offer no sure answers here, but simply put forward a suggestion: that, over the broad sweep of time, the continually recurring Southern identity may in part be due to a kind of environmental "possiblism." In other words, the South's distinctive climate and landscape—warm deciduous forests bounded on the west by the arid Great Plains and on the north by colder, more coniferous forests—certainly did not determine the region's history, but yet, by encouraging commonalities in lifeway and economy, made it particularly easy for the regional identity to crystalize time and time again. Indeed, perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the South's environment is its suitability for high-yield agriculture—plenty of rain, long growing season, and abundant fertile soil. Thus, it should not be too surprising that the temporal span with the most intensive farming, from the beginning of the Mississippi period (AD 1000) to the present, coincides with cultural expressions of Southern identity that were particularly strong.

It is also worth commenting on the Lower Mississippi

Valley's distinctiveness within the South as a whole. Two broad patterns emerged in our consideration of this subregion's history. First, the Lower Mississippi Valley consistently *preceded* the rest of the South in political developments that permitted the mobilization of large amounts of community labor, as evidenced by the construction of earthen mounds. And second, the very same subregion consistently *lagged behind* other subregions in adopting new farming practices, both the Eastern Agricultural Complex and the later regime involving maize. Inasmuch as political centralization and agricultural intensification are often interrelated, this seems like a contradiction; yet, in this case, we again may be witnessing tendencies that were brought about by a distinctive environment. The Lower Mississippi Valley is not only one of the most fertile agricultural regions on earth, but also had one of the richest natural environments for human foragers. Due to the enormous "subsidy" of nutrients carried and deposited each year by the floodwaters of the great Mississippi River, the sheer quantity of fish, birds, game, nut-bearing trees, and other edible plants available in this subregion was unsurpassed anywhere on the continent. This abundance permitted larger aggregations of people (and labor) than anywhere else based on natural bounty alone. Thus, it provided an ideal setting for political centralization and made possible the construction of monumental architecture even in the absence of farming. At the same time, the great natural bounty delayed the point at which local populations—due to increase in numbers or the demands of the political economy, or both—felt obliged to intensify food production by artificial means, i.e., by planting fields or adopting new crops.

However valid these suggestions turn out to be, I hope that this paper has at least focused attention on some issues that would not have come to mind without a consideration of Southern history in its fullest form. Historians and archaeologists must realize that the divide between "history" and "prehistory" is an artificial one, and that both disciplines are ultimately engaged in the same enterprise. Until these disciplinary boundaries become more permeable, and conversations across

these boundaries become routine, everyone's understanding of Southern history will needlessly suffer.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIVE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIES IN THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

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The shift from hunting and gathering to farming is one of the most significant economic transitions in the long precolonial history of North America. It receives so much attention in the Lower Mississippi Valley and the South because of its association with the rise of politically complex societies. The most spectacular of these complex societies in the Lower Mississippi Valley are the builders of great mound centers such as Winterville, Anna, and Emerald. The central importance of maize—what we call "corn"—and other crops in the subsistence and ritual systems of the colonial-period Natchez chiefdom is quite clear in the writings of Le Page du Pratz (1975), who lived in Natchez territory in the early 1700s. For this reason, archaeologists have devoted much energy to determining when and under what conditions agriculture developed in this area. They also try to figure out *why* it developed and what the social dynamics of the process may have been.

Until recently, our scenarios for the beginnings of agriculture in the South were permeated by four assumptions: (1) that all hunter-gatherers were nomadic, with lower population densities than farming societies; (2) that all mound-building cultures in the Mississippi Valley were agriculturally based; (3) that all serious agriculture in this region had corn as the dominant crop; and (4) all major crops in eastern North America were initially domesticated in Mesoamerica (i.e., Mexico and Central America). We now know that all four of these assumptions were wrong.

The fourth assumption went along with the notion that Mexican crops may have been transported directly from

there, by people such as traders or colonists who influenced the "less civilized" natives of the Mississippi Valley. The likelihood of direct and significant Mesoamerican influence is believed by so many people outside the ranks of North American archaeologists that I stress here at the beginning: *no Mesoamerican artifacts have yet been found at any precolonial site in the Mississippi Valley.* The widespread trade networks in eastern North America did not extend as far south as the Mesoamerican culture area, and individuals from either region who visited the other evidently did not set forces of social change into motion. The corn, beans, and pumpkins that eventually reached eastern North America after having been domesticated thousands of years earlier in Mexico travelled first to the American Southwest and were carried from there across the central or southern Great Plains into the Eastern Woodlands (Doebley, Goodman, and Stuber 1986; Fritz 1990, 1992).

Archaeologists recently have gained a new set of insights concerning agricultural beginnings and intensification in the Mississippi Valley: firstly, at least four plants native to eastern North America were domesticated locally—rather than having been introduced from elsewhere—long before the adoption of corn, and farming systems based on these native crops were economically significant across the Midwest, as far south as northern Mississippi (Fritz 1990; Smith 1992); secondly, in Louisiana and Mississippi, the long sequence of increasingly sedentary societies—who constructed mounds and other major earthworks—was not based on the production of corn, beans, or native seed crops (Gibson 1994; Jackson 1989; Saunders et al. 1994); thirdly, the adoption of corn (*Zea mays* ssp. *mays)* in the Lower Mississippi Valley took place centuries later than we previously believed, and intensification of corn-based farming probably accompanied the heightened interactions with chiefdoms that were developing in surrounding regions (Fritz and Kidder 1993); fourthly, and lastly, the acceptance and later success of late precolonial farming lie in a combination of agronomic skills and commitment to a ritual system that served high-status rulers and their families as long as the chiefs

fulfilled their part of the bargain by ensuring prosperity and preserving cosmological harmony.

Eastern North America as a Center of Agricultural Origins

One of the most exciting breakthroughs in North American archaeology in recent years has been confirmation that native plants in the Eastern Woodlands were domesticated and grown as crops before the introduction of any "tropical" domesticates from Mexico. Archaeologists had discussed and debated the evidence for an "Eastern Agricultural Complex" for decades (Jones 1936; Quimby 1946; Struever and Vickery 1973): some experts continued to doubt the domesticate status (as opposed to wild or weedy) of some putative native crops, and chronological uncertainties made it difficult to determine exactly when the "tropical" domesticates were introduced. A major breakthrough came with the recent realization that gourdy squashes (*Cucurbita pepo* ssp. *ovivera*) were native to the Gulf Coast region of what is now the American South, and that the squash rinds and seeds found at archaeological sites represent this "temperate," native plant rather than an introduced Mesoamerican crop (Decker-Walters 1993). Archaeologists currently agree that at least three native crops were cultivated in eastern North American gardens before 2000 BC, and that a fourth had been added by 1500 BC—centuries before we have evidence here for the presence of corn, beans, or any other Mesoamerican crop (Chapman and Watson 1993; Fritz 1990; Smith 1992). Eastern North America is now established as an independent center of plant domestication, although the most active zone of this arena is in central and southern Illinois, Tennessee, and Kentucky rather than the Lower Mississippi Valley.

The earliest cultivated plant appears to be the gourdy *pepo* squash (Figure 1), found in Maine, well outside its known range, by 3500 BC (Peterson and Asch Sidell 1996). Even earlier pepo gourd rind—dating to 5000 BC—has been

Figure 1. Cucurbita pepo *ssp.* pepo *gourd growing as a weed in soybean field a few kilometers north of St. Joseph (Tensas Parish), Louisiana (November 1990).*

recovered from two sites in Illinois, but the species grows wild there today, especially as a weed in soybean fields, and it might conceivably have ranged that far north as a wild or weedy plant in the past.[1]

Little gourds may have been valued initially as fishing implements (net floats and line bobbers), cups, containers, and rattles rather than sources of food. By 2300 BC, however, seeds at the Phillips Spring site in Missouri had increased in size to the point that we recognize domestication (King 1985). Fragments of pepo gourd rind from the J. W. Copes site in northeastern Louisiana, near Poverty Point, show that people in the Lower Mississippi Valley were utilizing and probably growing this plant before 1000 BC (Jackson 1989). Large containers had been bred by 500 BC (Yarnell 1969), and eventually, sweet and succulent forms of the fruits were developed, the ancestors of our modern yellow crookneck squashes and pattypans.

Figure 2. Sumpweed or marshelder (Iva annua)*: wild plants growing in the Mississippi River floodplain north of St. Louis, Missouri with the fruiting heads full of nearly mature seeds (October 1994).*

Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus* var. *macrocarpus*) and a closely related plant (Figures 2 and 3) called sumpweed or marshelder (*Iva annua* var. *macrocarpa*) were being cultivated in native gardens before 2000 BC. The seeds of both of these taxa are rich in oils, and people selected for plants with larger seeds and larger seed heads. The earliest larger-than-wild sized sumpweed specimens have come from Illinois, and the earliest domesticate-sized sunflower seeds have been found in

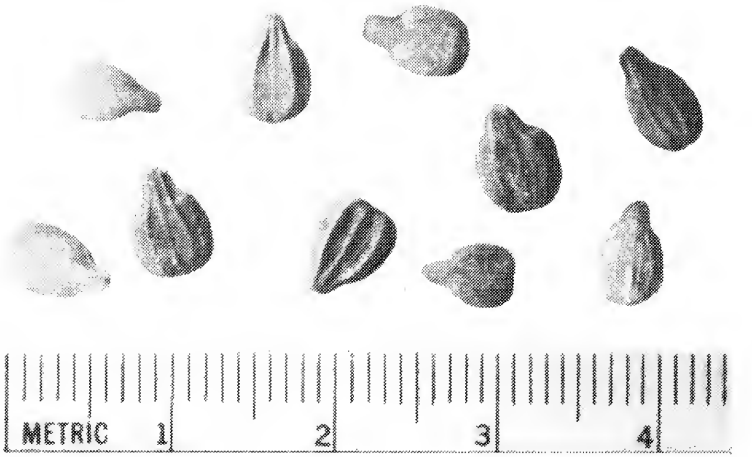

Figure 3. Achenes (fruits) of archaeological but undated domesticated sumpweed from Butler Creek Shelter in northwest Arkansas (University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology catalog no. 12888). Domesticated sumpweed achenes can reach 10 mm in length, whereas most wild sumpweed achenes are 2-3 mm long, and they rarely exceed 4 mm in length.

Tennessee (Chapman and Watson 1993; Crites 1993). The sunflower obviously flourished as an oil-seed crop, retaining its popularity into historic and modern times, eventually becoming a commodity with global economic significance. Sumpweed, however, declined across most of the East during late precolonial and early colonial times and is now extinct as a domesticated plant, although its wild counterpart grows profusely along the edges of floodplains.

The fourth early native crop—called chenopod, goosefoot, or lambsquarter (*Chenopodium berlandieri* ssp. *jonesianum*)—was domesticated by 1500 BC, with the earliest cultivated specimens coming from rockshelters in Kentucky (Smith and Cowan 1987). This plant is in the same genus as the important Andean domesticate known as Quinoa, and both species bear (or in the case of the North American crop, once bore) compact clusters of tiny seeds rich in both protein and carbohydrates. Rather than exhibiting a drastic increase in seed size, selection in this case favored fruits with thinner seed coats, truncate margins (Figure 4), and denser fruiting clusters (Fritz and Smith 1988).

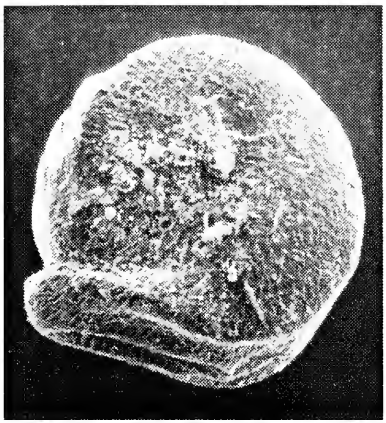

Figure 4. Scanning electron micrograph of domesticated Chenopodium berlandieri *ssp.* jonesianum *seed from Cow Ford shelter in northwest Arkansas (University of Arkansas Museum catalog no. 32-17-22). Chenopod stems from this sample were radiocarbon dated to AD 330 ± 700. The domesticated form typcially produces seeds with a thin coat and a truncate margin as shown here, in contrast to the wild form whose seeds typically have a thick coat and a rounded or acute margin.*

Figure 5. Domesticated archaeological chenopod seeds stored in a gourd container found at White Bluff Shelter in Benton County, Arkansas (University of Arkansas Museum catalog no. 35-56-17a; negative no. 320115). Seeds from this sample were directly radiocarbon dated to 10 BC ± 105.

Rockshelters from Arkansas to Ohio have yielded quantities of winnowed chenopod seeds put away in bags, baskets, or gourd containers (Figure 5), and pits excavated at open sites across the Midwest and Midsouth contained quantities of charred, thin-coated chenopod seeds as well. Although this once-important crop of eastern North America eventually suffered the same fate as sumpweed, it may well be the plant that the Natchez Indians called "choupichoul," which Le Page du Pratz (1975) described as being cultivated on sand bars along the Mississippi River in the early 1700s (Smith 1992).

Three other types of native food plants are abundant at many archaeological sites, frequently in close association with known domesticates, but unlike the above, their seeds do not exhibit distinct characteristics marking them as domesticates. These three possible crops are maygrass (*Phalaris caroliniana*), erect knotweed (*Polygonum erectum*), and little barley (*Hordeum pusillum*). Maygrass (Figure 6) and erect knotweed (Figure 7) both occur in storage context, as if their seeds were being saved as stock to be planted (Fritz 1994b). Furthermore, maygrass is so abundant at sites well outside its natural range that paleoethnobotanists generally consider it to be an intentionally propagated crop in the Midwest (Cowan 1978; Johannessen 1993).

Although gourds may have spread across parts of the Coastal Plain as weedy volunteers requiring little human attention, it is hard to explain away the large quantities of sunflower, sumpweed, chenopod, and later other types of native seed crops from sites in the Midcontintent as anything but carefully cultivated garden plants. By 500 BC, archaeologists estimate that up to two-thirds of the food consumed by some Native Americans may have consisted of indigenous crops (Yarnell 1974). And corn had yet to be introduced into eastern North America—at least we have no firm evidence of it here until later.

Corn finally reached the Eastern Woodlands about 2000 years ago, just before or just after the beginning of the Christian era (Riley et al. 1994). It makes its earliest appearance in the Midwest, where native seed crops were becoming increasingly

Figure 6. Maygrass (Phalaris caroliniana) *growing in Bolivar County, Mississippi, June 1990.*

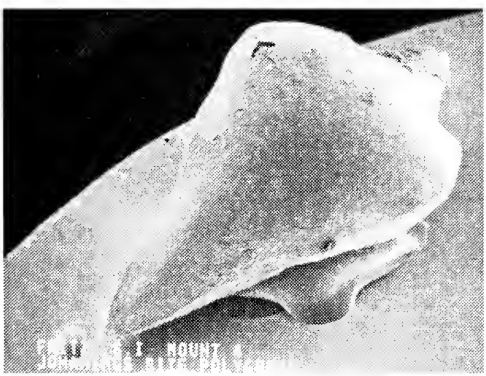

Figure 7. Scanning electron micrograph of knotweed achene (Polygonum erectum) *from the Johanings site in the American Bottom of west-central Illinois from a pit with ceramics typical of the Late Woodland Period (AD 300-800). Most archaeological knotweed specimens suspected of having been grown in gardens and fields are elongated, like this one, and have smooth, thin, fruit coats (pericarps), whereas most wild knotweed fruits are considerably shorter and have very bumpy fruit coats.*

popular, but it was not immediately accepted and intensified: instead, we find it only in very small amounts at a few scattered sites until AD 700 or 800, when some of the farmers in regions such as the American Bottom in west-central Illinois—surrounding the great site of Cahokia—began producing significant amounts of corn *along with* (not in place of) greater quantities of their native seed crops (Johannessen 1993; Lopinot 1994). At around AD 900-1000, people in many parts of the South began growing significant amounts of corn (Scarry 1995). Some archaeologists predicted that hunter-gatherers in the Lower Mississippi Valley would have been among the earliest to adopt agriculture (Cowan 1985:242; Ford 1985:349); but, as I discuss in the following section, this does not appear to have been the case.

Nonagricultural Mound Builders

The Lower Mississippi Valley seemed a likely place for early agriculture because of its history of mound building and long-distance trade. New radiocarbon dates confirm that mounds were built in Louisiana (as in Florida) as far back as 4000 BC, establishing precedents for the types of communal ritual activities and cooperative labor that culminated between 1500 and 1000 BC at the Poverty Point site (Russo 1994; Saunders et al. 1994). Archaeologists of the 1950s speculated that Poverty Point peoples, because of their monumental earthworks, must have had an agricultural economy (Willey and Phillips 1958), but subsistence-oriented research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s showed clearly that these early mound-builders obtained most of their food from hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plants—including pecans, acorns, and fruits (Jackson 1989; Saunders et al. 1994). The native gourdy squash is found at sites of this period, so it may have been cultivated; however, this plant may have grown wild in eastern Louisiana, and, even if cultivated, it might have been planted to produce fish-net floats or containers rather than food. Therefore, the people at Poverty Point were not farmers, and recent re-evaluations of

the site's population size and function make it out to be a trading center where large gatherings took place at periodic intervals—not the permanent residence of hundreds or thousands of inhabitants (Jackson 1991).

The ability of indigenous Lower Mississippi Valley people to support relatively dense populations without agriculture was well established, then, before 1000 BC. The next major mound-building culture, called Marksville, flourished during the first two centuries of the first millennium AD. Again, past researchers speculated that agriculture must have been practiced, and again, we believe today that a sophisticated hunting and harvesting regime enabled Marksville societies to carry on their mortuary rituals and far-flung exchange networks without farming. The same appears to be true of the culture responsible for building the amazing Troyville site in present day Jonesville, Louisiana—a multiple mound center dating to approximately AD 500. Much more subsistence-oriented research must be conducted, however, before we are able to reconstruct Troyville's economy.

By subsistence-oriented research, I mean excavations that make use of intensive, fine-mesh flotation as a recovery technique (Watson 1976). It is impossible to obtain a representative sample of plant remains from archaeological sites by simply screening the soil (which works well for recovering artifacts), because these remains are often too small to be caught in the mesh or too delicate to withstand the mechanical abrasion. The flotation technique is time-consuming, but it is the only way to determine whether or not crops were being grown.

T. R. Kidder of Tulane University and I have been working in Tensas Parish, Louisiana since 1989 at five sites with components dating between AD 200 and 1500. The assemblages of animal bones and flotation-derived plant remains demonstrate that the transition to agriculture occurred later and was more gradual than we had predicted. We have no evidence for corn before AD 850, and less evidence than expected for the use of native seeds that were cultivated rather than harvested from the wild. Corn was clearly a part of the diet between AD 900

and 1200, but in rather small amounts; serious agricultural intensification occurred only after AD 1100 or 1200 (Fritz and Kidder 1993; Kidder 1996).

The adoption of corn in Tensas Parish falls in the middle of the Coles Creek period (AD 700-1200). The Coles Creek period is marked by the appearance of well-made ceramics and regional mound centers distributed across the bottomland zone between the Tensas and Mississippi Rivers (Kidder 1992). Coles Creek culture also flourished in the Yazoo River basin in western Mississippi, north of Vicksburg (Brain 1991; Williams and Brain 1983). Coles Creek mounds served primarily as platforms for specialized structures or activities—probably of a ritual nature. The mounds are oriented around plazas and have been interpreted as signatures of hierarchically ranked societies of the sort anthropologists call chiefdoms (Steponaitis 1986). Their builders, like the builders of the complex-looking mounds before them, were once thought to be producers of corn or possibly the indigenous seed crops: sunflower, sumpweed, and chenopod.

What we found in the flotation samples however, were indications of intensified management of wild resources: primarily acorns (*Quercus* spp.), with smaller amounts of pecans (*Carya illinoensis*). Fruits—especially persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), palmetto (*Sabal minor*), grapes (*Vitis* spp.), and blackberries (*Rubus* sp.)—were also major foods. There is also evidence for the harvesting of native seeds; some were probably planted, but most were apparently wild types. All sumpweed from sites in the Tensas Basin, for example, is wild-sized rather than domesticated. Maygrass is quite common at Lower Valley sites, but it grows wild here and cannot be classified as domesticated based on its physical characteristics. Squash rind along with occasional thin-coated chenopod seeds is present, so small-scale cultivation appears to have played a part in early Coles Creek economies. Still, the shift toward more serious farming does not appear to have begun until Coles Creek cultural developments were well underway, at approximately AD 900.

Corn, then, was brought into the subsistence economy of groups who were anything but low-density, nomadic, purely egalitarian hunter-gatherers. Early Coles Creek people were skillful harvesters and managers of the levees and bayous; and they were probably as sedentary as any preindustrial group could be in this sort of floodplain. The most important plant food—the acorn—may have been gathered from intensively managed, orchard-like groves, where use rights were strictly enforced (Fritz 1994a). The productivity of fruit trees might also have been enhanced by practices that could be categorized as early arboriculture. Fish weirs were probably built and maintained. Management practices such as these could have augmented rather than depleted the already abundant resources, while at the same time intensifying territoriality and competition. Population density seems to have increased throughout the Coles Creek period, and some degree of overpopulation relative to existing food resources might have led to the adoption of corn. I believe, however, that other factors were equally if not more important.

The late Coles Creek period (AD 900-1200) corresponds temporally with the rise of Mississippian societies in the Central Mississippi Valley and across the South. This involved the intensification and spread of corn-based agriculture, the shift in many regions to shell-tempered ceramics, the rise to power of hereditary chiefs who were treated as gods owing to genealogy, and the construction of civic and ceremonial centers with up to dozens of mounds arranged around plazas (Brown, this volume; Steponaitis, this volume). Trade, alliances, and conflicts among Mississippian chiefs must have kept life from getting dull, and served as sources of new blood and exotic materials. Furthermore, corn played a big part in Mississippian rituals, the most important ceremony at the time of European colonization being the "green corn ceremony" or "busk" (Hudson 1976; Swanton 1911). It is in the late Coles Creek period that trade goods from Mississippian centers such as Cahokia begin to appear in the Yazoo Basin. Earlier Coles

Creek societies do not seem to have interacted much with groups beyond the Lower Mississippi Valley (Brain 1991; Kidder 1992).

I speculate that negotiations between high-status individuals stimulated agricultural production in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Leaders of Coles Creek societies would have been responsible for hosting and negotiating with their counterparts across the Late Coles Creek region, and for dealing with the already more stratified Mississippian chiefs. Several archaeologists (e.g. Rose, Marks, and Tieszen 1991; Scarry 1993) have suggested that corn was at first more of a delicacy than a staple—used at community feasts and other special occasions. The more corn a community could provide at a feast, the more leverage its leaders would have in negotiating with chiefs of the expansionary Mississippian polities whose civic centers had granaries full of corn.

Another possibility is that corn had primarily a ritual role in the early stages of the transition to farming. In support of the connection between corn and ceremonies, we found a pit dug into the surface of Mound B at the Osceola site in Tensas Parish, Louisiana that contained more corn than any other feature at the site; and this pit also contained tobacco seeds (Kidder and Fritz 1993). Tobacco was a sacred plant for Southeastern Indians—an essential ingredient of numerous rituals—and this one pit is the only place in which Kidder and I have found it so far. Other Late Coles Creek samples have small amounts of corn, but never in greater amounts than the wild plant foods, although corn increases in its visibility. Acorns remain the most important carbohydrate source throughout Coles Creek times.

Our evidence currently indicates that the production of corn was intensified after AD 1100 or 1200. This is the time when—without noticeable intrusion of people, but with clear cultural continuity—the lifeways of the local Coles Creek people changed in enough subtle ways to be given a new archaeological label: Plaquemine. One Plaquemine site in Tensas Parish—the Emerson site—has been subjected to intensive flotation, and it is full of corn fragments in much higher frequencies than before. Acorn shell, however, is still

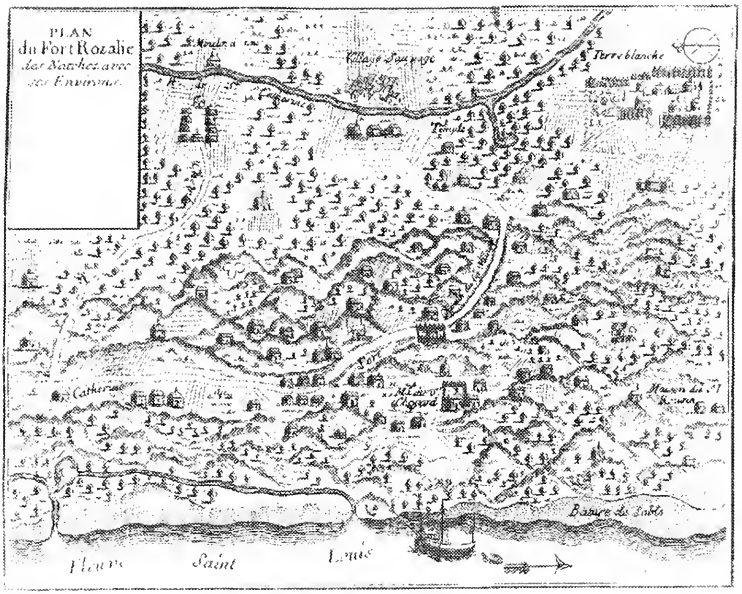

Figure 8. Map of the Natchez region ca. 1725 (Dumont 1753, 2:94)

very abundant, and the popularity of persimmon, palmetto, and other native fruits also persisted (Kidder, Fritz, and Smith 1993). There is no good precolonial evidence for cultivated garden beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) in the Lower Mississippi Valley, but we know from surrounding regions that beans did not become part of Southern agricultural systems until a few hundred years before the arrival of Europeans (Fritz 1990). Non-native squashes and pumpkins (e.g. *Cucurbita argyrosperma*)—varieties that actually were domesticated in Mesoamerica—might have been adopted as well by Lower Mississippi Valley farmers in these centuries, since they were described by early Europeans including Le Page du Pratz (1975).

Agricultural intensification goes along with a shift in settlement patterns in the lowlands of the Tensas and Yazoo Basins: the Plaquemine sites are smaller and more widely distributed across the levees. This must have entailed additional clearing for corn fields and the creation of a patchwork-like landscape of alternating fields in use, fields in fallow, settlements, and carefully managed groves of nut trees—oaks

predominating. There were probably few, if any, natural levees left unaltered by human activities at this time, and similar clearing in the Natchez Bluffs region is suggested by Iberville's description of the landscape between the Mississippi River and the Grand Village of the Natchez in 1700:

> From the landing place on the river one ascends a very steep hillside about 150 fathoms high covered completely with woods. Being on top of the hill one finds a country of plains and prairies filled with little hills, in some places groves of trees, *many oaks*, and many roads cut through, going from one hamlet to another or to cabins [Indians' houses]. Those who traveled 3 or 4 leagues about say they find everywhere the same country, from the edge of the hill to the village of the chief [translated by Swanton 1911:190-191; emphasis mine].

Dumont's map of ca. 1725 (Dumont 1753, vol. 2:94) corresponds nicely to Iberville's verbal description (Figure 8), showing hamlets surrounded by fields, and connected by roads and paths passing through relatively open country.

Chiefs, Priests, and Agriculture

Another new feature on the late precolonial landscape was the much larger mound center, where chiefs lived and the dispersed populations congregated for major ceremonies and other events (Williams and Brain 1983). Corn played a central role in the functioning of these chiefdoms. Surplus was brought to the mound center where it served to provision members of the ruling elite family (who did not labor in the fields themselves) and could be used by the chief to offset shortfalls among commoners in times of need. Archaeologists have called this a "tributary economy," but the indigenous

farmers might not have viewed themselves as being taxed or stripped of tribute. Most gifts of food may have been presented for ceremonial feasting, with decisions about how much to grow, how much to bring to feasts, and how much, if any, to take home being made at the household level rather than imposed from above. Families would produce more than needed whenever possible in order to participate in this system, but after the initial transition, their motives for producing surplus might have been more religious than secular; i.e., they were not merely satisfying the demands of power-hungry rulers.

The archaeological record shows that individual chiefdoms rose and fell, but the general pattern persisted for at least 500 years. With several varieties of corn as the chief crop, with nuts and native fruits skillfully managed to enhance their productivity, with fish and wild game abundant, and with a ritually sanctified system of leadership and social control, the Lower Mississippi Valley supported the healthy populations that terrorized De Soto and greatly impressed Le Page du Pratz. The ability of the eighteenth-century Natchez chiefdom to continue functioning until 1730, in spite of European-inflicted epidemics and depredations, attests to the achievements of indigenous farming societies in the Lower Mississippi Valley.

Conclusion

New discoveries about precolonial agriculture are being made at such a fast pace that authors of archaeological textbooks have a hard time keeping up to date. Getting the word out to scholars in other fields or to interested members of the general public is even more difficult. Many people still believe that the agricultural systems encountered by De Soto and other early Europeans reflect the same composition of crops first grown by Indian peoples in eastern North America, and that all three of the principal crops—corn, beans, and squash—were introduced from Mexico. The recognition that eastern *pepo* squash is a local plant domesticated thousands of years before the acquisition of corn, and that corn preceded beans by

hundreds of years in the South's native agriculture, breaks apart the "Tropical Trinity" into three crops with very distinct origins and histories. Because the eastern *pepo* squash and a suite of native seed crops were domesticated in the Eastern Woodlands long before introduction of any domesticates from south of the modern U.S. border, it is clear that early food production was very different from the later systems that flourished at AD 1500.

There is little evidence, however, that the Mississippi Valley's inhabitants south of the Arkansas River's mouth practiced serious gardening or farming before the adoption of maize as a staple crop. Native domesticates, including thin-coated chenopod and large-seeded sunflower, have been recovered from a few Baytown and Coles Creek period sites—especially toward the northern end of this area (e.g. Scarry 1995:275)—but in lower frequencies than elsewhere in the South and Midwest. The Plum Bayou culture area along the Arkansas River in east-central Arkansas is the farthest south that evidence has yet been found for large-scale production of native seed crops (Smith 1996). Chenopod cultivated in the Lower Mississippi Valley proper seems to have fit into the eighteenth-century Natchez pattern of casual sowing in convenient sand bars or other open places.

The relatively late onset of serious agriculture in the Lower Mississippi Valley highlights the accomplishments of the pre-agricultural Native peoples who relied on, harvested sustainably, and probably managed in sophisticated ways the rich natural resources of the alluvial valley and its bordering uplands. These people were sufficiently well organized to begin building large mound centers such as Watson Brake as early as 3400 BC (Saunders et al. 1997). Two thousand years later, the large numbers of people who congregated at Poverty Point were building even larger earthworks, but were still living on wild game, fish, and nuts rather than crops, even though groups to the north, with which the Poverty Point peoples certainly traded, were already planting sunflower, sumpweed, and chenopod. Native crops had filtered into the Lower Mississippi

Valley by the second half of the first millennium AD, if not sooner, but the diets of Troyville and early Coles Creek mound builders were still dominated by wild resources. Even the Plaquemine farmers, who excelled at corn agriculture, enjoyed a mixed subsistence base that included acorns along with many other wild plants and animals. Therefore, in addition to recognizing the achievements of these later farmers, we now better appreciate their predecessors, the complex fisher-gatherer-hunters of the Lower Mississippi Valley.

Notes

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[1] See Asch (1994) for a strong argument against interpreting the 7000-year-old *pepo* rind in Illinois as wild.

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THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NATCHEZ CHIEFDOM

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In the upper right corner of a watercolor by Alexandre De Batz, made in the early 1730s, is an image of an unidentified Indian male decked in a splendid outfit (Figure 1). Although the caption for this picture reads, "Choctaw Savages Painted as Warriors Carrying Scalps" (Bushnell 1927; Wilson 1963), this distinguished individual stands out from the rest. Some scholars believe he may have been a Natchez chief. If so, it may be the best image we have of a paramount chief, or "Great Sun," of the Natchez chiefdom (William Sturtevant, personal communication, 1985; Swanton 1911:106-107). The purpose of this paper is to present a summary of what this Natchez chiefdom was like. I will also discuss some of the contributions archaeology has made to improving our understanding of these fascinating people.

We do not know the exact boundaries of the Natchez chiefdom. It is probable that it shifted through time, but it has most often been associated with the eastern shore of the Mississippi River between Vicksburg and the Fort Adams region in the state of Mississippi. Most of the population probably resided between the Big Black and Homochitto rivers, with the densest occupation having occurred on the land now within the city of Natchez, as well as its immediate hinterlands (Figure 2). This region consists of loess bluffs, thick deposits of wind-blown sediments that formed along the eastern edge of the Mississippi Valley in the late Pleistocene. Any traveler ascending or descending the Mississippi River knew that when these magnificent hills came into sight they had entered Natchez territory.

The early eighteenth-century French settlements were established in the heart of the Natchez domain (Broutin 1731), through which ran the beautiful, picturesque St. Catherine

Figure 1. Detail from a drawing by Alexandre de Batz revealing what may have been an early eighteenth-century Natchez chief. Watercolor entitled "Sauvages Tchaktas Matachez en Guerriers qui portent des Chevelures." (Courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Negative no. N31908; catalog no. 42-70-10/19.)

Creek. Its floodplain supported the major villages, but the smaller communities were arranged on top of the innumerable hills that dot the landscape. These tiny settlements, known as hamlets, often amounted to only a handful of houses occupied by related people. The French colonists also settled on these same hilltops, taking advantage of locations that were already cleared by earlier Indian settlement. In the eighteenth century the rich topsoil of the lush Natchez landscape was still very much intact, and the region was known far and wide for its agricultural qualities.

The early French adventurers left many written and visual images of the daily life of the Natchez Indians (Dumont de Montigny 1753; Le Page du Pratz 1758, 1972; Swanton 1911),

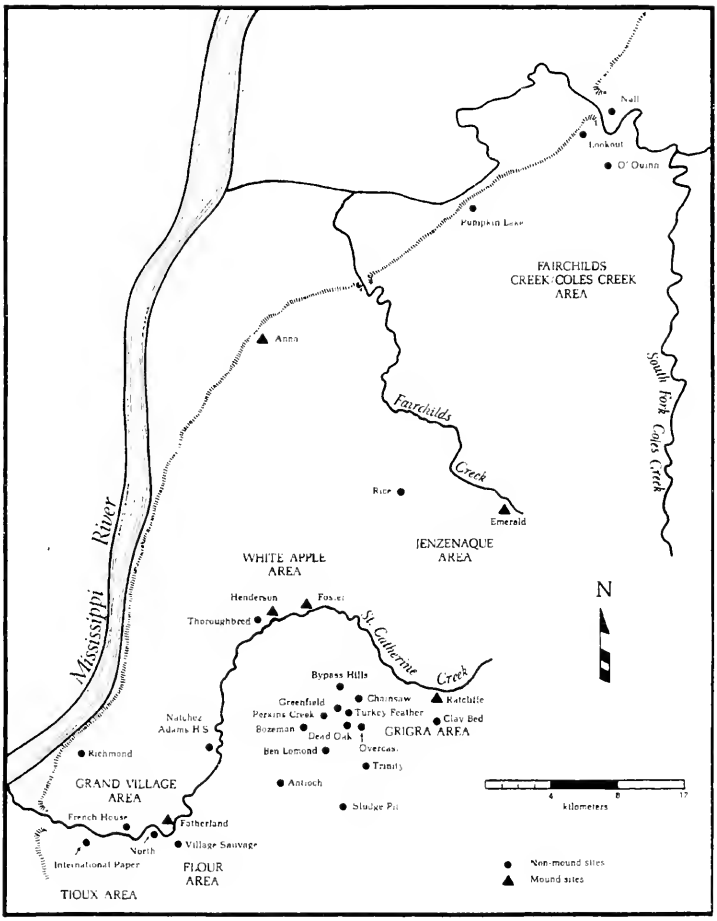

Figure 2. Sites and village areas of the eighteenth-century Natchez chiefdom. Reproduced from Brown 1985a: Figure 3. (Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Drawing by Nancy Lambert-Brown.)

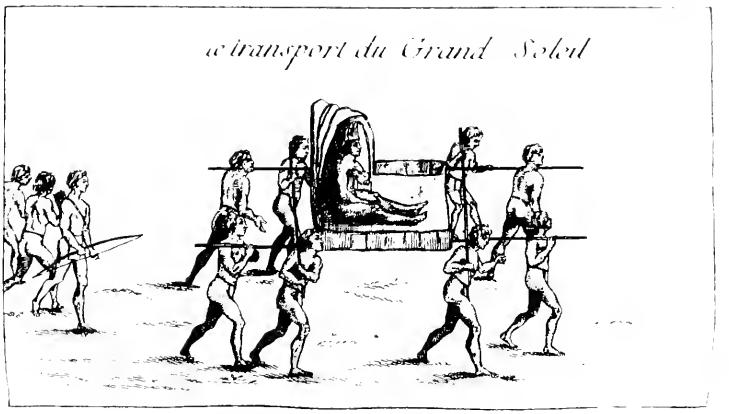

Figure 3. The "Great Sun" of the Natchez being carried on a litter. (Reproduced from Le Page du Pratz 1758, vol. 2, facing p. 367. Photograph by Hillel Burger.)

as well as considerable substantive information as to how the elite were treated. As revealed in Figure 3, the paramount chief of the Natchez, known as the Great Sun, was typically carried on a litter to and from the various festivals they held during the year. His feet were not supposed to touch the ground at such times. We receive the impression from these early French writers that this leader of the Natchez stood (or sat), physically and symbolically, high above the multitude. Le Page du Pratz (1972:329) stated that the Natchez believed their Great Sun was descended from the sun itself, his ancestors having turned into stone idols upon their death (Brown 1989b:22, 24, Figure 13; Swanton 1911:172). The Great Sun was said to have had the power of life and death over his subjects. It is probable that the French may have been a bit overzealous in drawing parallels between the chief of the Natchez and their own Sun King in Paris, but there can be no question that the Natchez nobility were indeed powerful individuals. The Natchez chiefdom itself was the last gasp of the great Mississippian chiefdom societies that thrived in the Lower Mississippi Valley in late precolonial times.

As with Southeastern Indians in general, Natchez social organization was matrilineal (Knight 1990). The Great Sun received his title and status through his mother and the position passed to his sister's son rather than to his own offspring.

A major part of the Great Sun's responsibilities was the distribution of food. The agricultural harvest of maize, beans and squash was stored in granaries, eventually to be redistributed to the people.

The Great Sun, as befitting his esteemed position, received the many foreign delegations that visited his territory (Le Page du Pratz 1972; McWilliams 1988:28). The calumet, or pipe of peace, was generally used at such times. It was a two-part instrument, consisting of a stem or wand, and a pipe bowl made of a red stone called catlinite. The highly ornate stem, often embellished with feathers, beads, and various animal parts, was generally more revered than the bowl; but it was the juxtaposition of the bowl and the stem that gave the calumet its ritual power. Although it had many purposes in Southern Indian society (Galloway 1989), its prime function was to make friends out of foes, or at least out of potential foes, as it was never clear whether visitors meant harm or benefit. That is why the French explorers learned very quickly to carry calumets with them as they travelled through the area (Brown 1989a:311).

In the early eighteenth century Natchez was a triracial society. Runaway African slaves were adopted or owned by the Natchez Indians, and they occasionally can be seen in the pictures made by De Batz. They usually have a very different attire than the Indians in these same pictures. Bodily adornment was typical among the Indians of the Lower Mississippi Valley, including the Natchez, and most of the symbols that appear in DeBatz's pictures were strongly embedded in precolonial Mississippian art. These designs occur on pottery, stone, shell, and copper objects dating to late precolonial times (Wallace 1993).

The houses of the Natchez were of wattle-and-daub construction, with roofs made of bundles of grass or stalks of corn. Mats were usually applied to both the inside and outside of the walls (Swanton 1911:59-60), which were made of wooden poles set deeply into the ground. Although these walls no longer exist, the trenches in which the poles were placed are easily detectable archaeologically. Most of the recent archaeological work in the Natchez region has focused on settlement

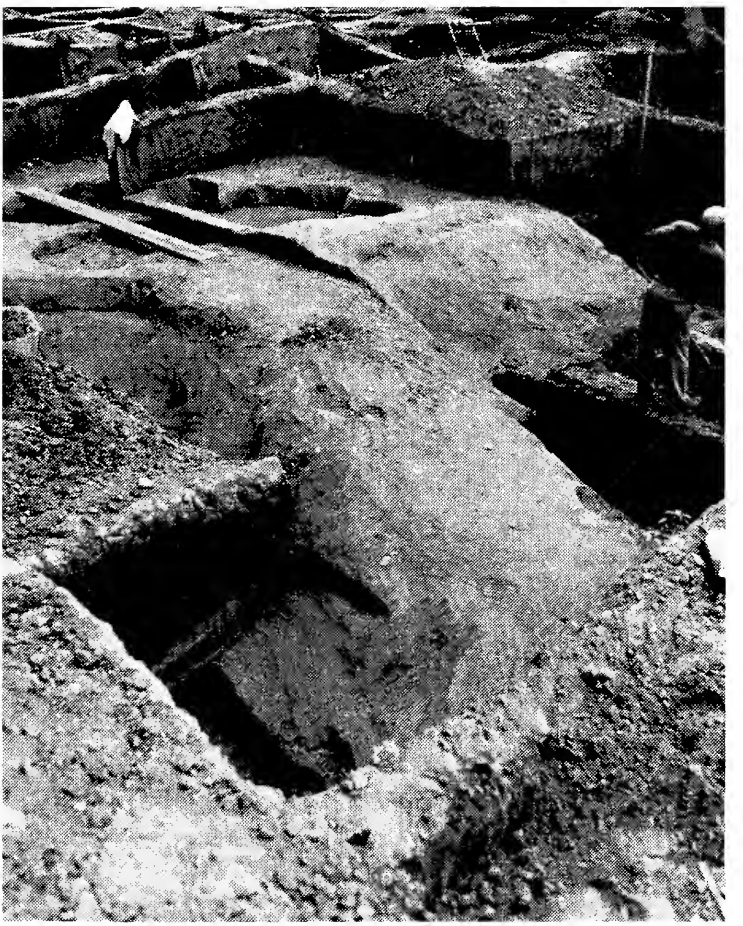

Figure 4. A construction stage in Mound C at the Fatherland site, the Grand Village of the eighteenth-century Natchez chiefdom. (Courtesy of the Lower Mississippi Survey, Peabody Museum. Photograph by Stephen Williams. Negative no. 62/22.)

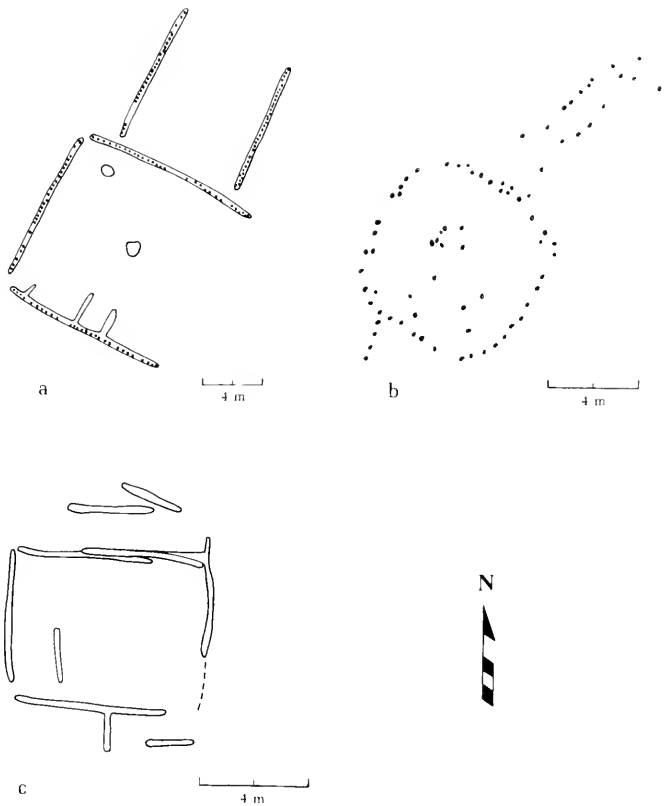

Figure 5. Various structure patterns at the Fatherland site, showing wall trench buildings and a single-set post building. (Reproduced from Brown 1985b: Figure 7. Courtesy of Kent State University Press. Drawing by Nancy Lambert-Brown.)

patterns. Over the years we have come to understand where the Natchez established their communities, and we are gradually learning what their settlements may have looked like (Brain 1978; Brain et al. n.d.; Brown 1985a-b).

Historical documents have revealed the existence of between six and nine Natchez villages in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Swanton 1911:46-47). The villages most often mentioned in the numerous French accounts of Natchez were the Grand Village, the Flour Village, White Apple, Jenzenaque, Grigra, and Tioux (Figure 2). The location of the Grand Village, where the paramount chief lived, has long been recognized as the Fatherland site (Ford 1936:59-64; Neitzel 1965; 1983). Two of the three mounds at this site once served as foundations for the Natchez temple and the home of the Great Sun. The space between these two mounds was the place where major ceremonial activities were held in the early eighteenth century. Mounds B and C were excavated at different times by James A. Ford, Moreau B. Chambers, and Robert S. Neitzel. Figure 4 shows one of the construction stages that Neitzel uncovered in his excavation of Mound C. He also discovered a number of structures in and around the plaza area of the site (Figure 5).

The locations of other Natchez villages are revealed in several historic maps. White Apple, for example, was situated on St. Catherine Creek northeast of the city (D'Anville 1732 in Giraud 1991:383; Diron 1719). It is believed that the primary community was at the Foster site, located near the town of Washington (Figure 2). Written descriptions of campaigns waged against the Natchez during the various wars have also been extremely helpful in determining village locations, as has the material evidence from archaeology.

Each of the villages, except for the Grand Village, was ruled by second-order chiefs, blood relatives of the Great Sun. These villages served as local ceremonial centers. They were mound centers too and, from what can be determined, most of them were comparable in size to the Fatherland site. It should be emphasized that these were not densely populated communities: the bulk of the population lived in small settlements

Figure 6. Aerial photograph of the Emerald site taken in 1958. (Courtesy of Robert Neuman.)

of several families in the general vicinity of each secondary center (Brain et al. n.d.; Brown 1982:185; 1989b:12-15).

The Emerald site is believed to have been one of the principal settlements of the Natchez Indians in the sixteenth century, when De Soto's army passed through the Mississippi Valley (Figure 6). The immense earthwork at Emerald dwarfs the mounds at Fatherland. It is testimony to the fact that the Natchez chiefdom of the eighteenth century was but a pale reflection of that which had existed only a couple of hundred years earlier. In the 1540s the Natchez chiefdom appears to have had two principal centers—the Glass site in the north, in the vicinity of Vicksburg, and the Emerald site in the south. These were probably occupied by the Quigaltam of the De Soto accounts (Clayton et al. 1993). Jeffrey Brain (1982) made a very good case for Emerald having been the site visited by Nicolas de la Salle and Henry de Tonti in 1682, but it is clear that by this time Emerald was no longer the premier center. That status had already passed to the Grand Village at the Fatherland site.

The Emerald site of the eighteenth century is believed to have been only a secondary center, called "Jenzenaque" or the Village of the Walnuts (Figure 2). Bienville attacked Jenzenaque in the Third Natchez War of 1723. Dumont de Montigny referred to the village of Jenzenaque as having been on high ground, which certainly is a fitting description for Emerald:

> Some time later they perceived a strongly built cabin on a height; they did not at all doubt that this was the place where the savages were to be found. Immediately the drums beat, the fifes played, the army formed in battalion squares and advanced toward the cabin. The chief of the Tonikas, who was at the head, arrived first on the height .... The chief of the Tonikas encircling the height, perceived below a minor chief of the enemy called the Little Sun. We should rather say, seeing each other at the same time, to aim and fire was almost the same thing. The chief of the Tonikas threw down his enemy dead on the spot, and fell himself dangerously wounded [Dumont de Montigny in Swanton 1911:214].

One receives the impression that the height in question is more that just a simple pyramidal mound. The platform mound at Emerald, which is 235 m long and 133 m wide, fits the description admirably.

Over the years a considerable amount of excavation has been conducted at Emerald. The famous Vincent Perrault pipes (Brown 1992:256, 258-263), one of which is shown in Figure 7, were found to the south of the smaller secondary mound on top of the main platform. Excavations undertaken in this location in 1972 by the Lower Mississippi Survey of Harvard University's Peabody Museum (Figure 8) found evidence of disturbed burials with which the pipes may well have been associated (Brain et al. n.d.). John L. Cotter

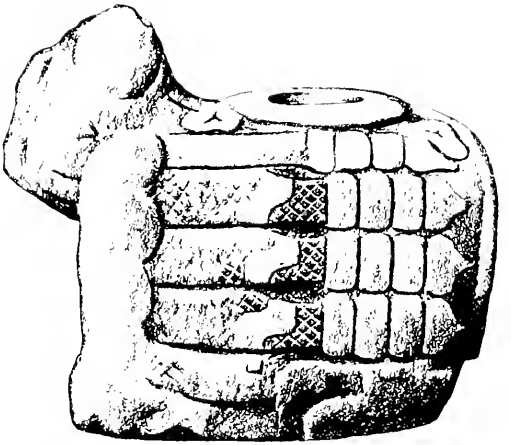

Figure 7. One of the famous Perrault pipes from the Emerald site. Length, 12 cm. (Reproduced from Phillips and Brown 1978: Figure 267. Milwaukee Public Museum, catalog no. 16205/5390. Drawing courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

Figure 8. Excavations at the Emerald site by the Lower Mississippi Survey in 1972. (Courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Narvard University.)

worked at Emerald as part of a National Park Service (NPS) team in 1951. The mound was stabilized at this time in preparation for its use as a park along the Natchez Trace. Long trenches were dug through the northern and southern slopes of the base mound by the NPS crew. Much was revealed about the construction of the mound and the culture history of its occupants from these excavations (Cotter 1951). The Lower Mississippi Survey never did find evidence of eighteenth-century occupation in its work at Emerald in 1972, but finding historic trade materials at Emerald is akin to discovering the proverbial needle in a haystack. We suspect that Emerald is Jenzenaque, but unfortunately we cannot yet prove it (Brain et al. n.d.).

The Grigra settlement of the eighteenth-century Natchez chiefdom is believed to have been located due east of the city, and south of the town of Washington (Figure 2). More than a dozen sites yielding European trade goods have been found in that locale. Many of these sites were discovered in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the underbrush was being cleared beneath powerlines (Brown 1985a). Unfortunately, these clearing activities often resulted in the removal of much of the topsoil, leaving only the impressions of house posts and scattered artifacts to remind us that Indians once lived on these hills.

One historic settlement was found in a location north of the city, for which we lack a historic village name. The written documents are silent as to whom the people were who occupied the site known as Lookout (Figure 2), but from the types of pottery found there, I am fairly certain they are a group from the north that was adopted into the Natchez chiefdom. Their houses lined the bluff edge, providing a fine view of the Mississippi Valley, and the bottomlands below.

The Lower Mississippi Survey performed test excavations at Lookout in 1981-82 (Brown 1985a:12-56). This site had been heavily bulldozed a year or so previously, and it was from that activity that a historic burial was uncovered. Contained in that burial was a very small sandstone effigy pipe (Figure 9). The front of the pipe has a face carved into it, probably human, while its side bears a crude feathered serpent design.

Figure 9. Sandstone pipe from the Lookout site, with a feathered serpent on its side and a human face on its end. Length, 8.3 cm. (Courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Gift of Robert Prospere of Natchez. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Negative no. N31906; catalog no. 980-14-10/58238.)

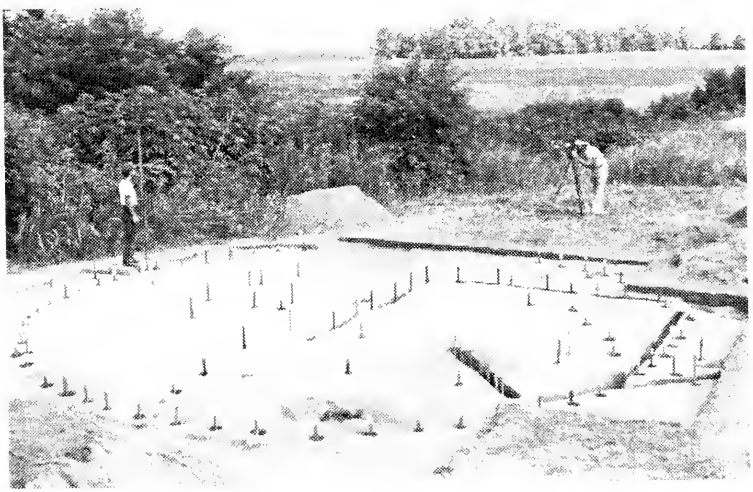

Figure 10. Building patterns at the Lookout site. (Reproduced from Brown 1985a: Figure 17. Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Photograph by Ian W. Brown.)

As mentioned above, effigy pipes have been found at the Emerald site, but they were of far higher quality (Figure 7) and at least two hundred years older than the Lookout specimen. The Lookout pipe represents a marked collapse in the wonderful pipe-making tradition of the Natchez Indians.

Despite the bulldozing that occurred at Lookout, we were still able to obtain valuable information concerning the construction of houses at this site (Brown 1985b:264-265). Circular single set post houses were the earlier forms built at Lookout (Figure 10), but by late precolonial and colonial times the residents had switched to rectangular ones. Trenches were dug to support the vertical poles of the walls. Lookout has contributed extremely important information to our understanding of Natchez Indian settlement patterns.

In addition to understanding changing settlement preferences, archaeological research has taught us much about other aspects of Natchez life. Through the study of the things that were discarded or lost, we can also learn about material culture, about diet, and about the treatment of the dead. All of this represents only a fragment of what the Natchez chiefdom was like in the eighteenth century, but it is important information and contributes to an understanding of Natchez history. Through these "documents" from the ground, we gain an appreciation of the important role that the Natchez Indians played in the State of Mississippi—a role that was terminated as two worlds collided.

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COMMENTARY AND REFLECTION ON LONG-TERM CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES

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I remember once discussing with Jean-Claude Gardin, a French specialist in Western Asiatic archaeology, whether we might be able to rationalize a junket for him to Mississippi to talk about "south-ness" in terms of a comparison of his region of interest and ours. We were talking half-facetiously, and with his Structuralist bias he would be the last person to think in terms of a simple- minded environmental determinism, but it is clear that the base of long-term continuities in any region—Fernand Braudel's *longue durée* already evoked by Steponaitis (this volume)—must be sought in the environmental setting, as Braudel recognized.

Here in Natchez we need not go far to have our attention arrested immediately by the River. Ever-present, huge, draining almost the whole of a continent, even the Corps of Engineers admits that the Mississippi cannot ultimately be controlled in our own time, and for all premodern periods controlling it by other than metaphysical means was virtually never considered. Here on the privileged bluffs, the high side of the valley, residences would never have been directly threatened, which is why it has always been a good place to live, why it is a palimpsest of living from the days of fossil megafauna to these latter days of megacasino development.

But while controlling the river itself was beyond the means of less arrogant cultures than our own, controlling traffic on it, controlling the content of that traffic—in modern terms, controlling communication—could be aspired to, and apparently was. As the river provided transportation and communication, it also provided power to those who knew how to use it. The archaeologists tell us how inspiration for the building of

massive substructural mounds may have traveled from south to north, while the maize heart of the Mississippian economies may have been transported via the river's western tributaries into the valley.

We know more certainly, just because we find specific artifacts in places where we know they were not made, that intricately-worked shell ornaments and elaborate ceramic vessels were exchanged among the privileged; we suspect that less perdurable goods, like supple painted buffalo hides, gorgeous featherwork, and wooden sculptures, may have taken the same routes. But these objects tell us more; the fact that they represent many hours of a craftsperson's investment allows us to contemplate a culture where enough surplus to provide time for such investment was available, and where certain people had enough control over that surplus to convert it into material symbols that they could wear themselves or use to honor others.

Another of the great gifts of the river was fertility, something that we often forget as we plunder the distilled remains of dead dinosaurs to bring life to exhausted fields. People in earlier times understood that if floods brought devastation and were better avoided than fought, they also refreshed the fields with fertile soils carried from the heartland plains and prairies. And as I have just said, it was this fertility that provided the surplus that in turn provided power to those who were able to organize agricultural exploitation of the earth. Archaeologists and ethnographers tell us that the Mississippian chiefdoms and the eighteenth-century Natchez did this somewhat similarly: "ordinary" people worked the earth both to feed their families and to provide a surplus for their community, while that surplus was managed by leaders whose knowledge of earthly and heavenly forces qualified them to do so.

Although the specifics of the control of communication and control of fertility changed over time, there has been a stern continuity in the structural duality already established in Mississippian times: the duality between those who ran things and those who did not. Though the mix in the resource base of the land and communication has varied over time, and the people included in the classes of controlled and controlling

have changed, from the perspective of the *longue durée* this duality is the theme against which a counterpoint of a few important substitutions and discontinuities has been improvised.

Communication

Let us look first at the issue of communication. There have been two possibilities over time: either the river was fought over, by segment or as a whole, which made communication variously difficult; or the river was controlled by one power or cooperating powers, which streamlined communication. We think that during Mississippian times substantive traffic went both ways, and that it encompassed a certain amount of exchange in goods and a good deal of exchange in ideas. We cannot be more specific; we cannot trace the vicissitudes of control in the deep past with accuracy. But Hernando de Soto and his merry men met with chiefs able to command what the Spaniards described as "armadas" of war canoes on the Mississippi, and these observations make it clear that a very few chiefs could and did control specific stretches of the river in late prehistory—perhaps including the supremely arrogant Quigualtam here in the Natchez region, who bid Soto dry up the river to prove he was the son of the sun (Clayton, Knight and Moore 1993:vol. 1, 134).[1]

We do not know if any single Valley chiefdom ever established control over the whole river, but it is certain that the Europeans tried to do so as soon as they knew of its existence. When the French came to make a colony in the Mississippi Valley, it was for one reason: La Salle envisioned control of the trade and communication of the continental interior through control of its "Great River." La Salle convinced Louis XIV—himself a sun king—of the importance of controlling the Mississippi. Early settlements were concentrated on the Gulf coast because of the need for transoceanic communication, but the financiers to whom the colony was shortly entrusted looked again toward the river and its potential for moving people and

products. Natchez became a key settlement because its location securely high above the river coincided with a rich aeolian soil suitable to high-return cash crops like indigo and tobacco; but it was its location with respect to the river that had continuing importance long after the Natchez revolted and ejected French farmers for good. Significantly, the French fort was reestablished after the Natchez wars, though the farms were not. During the French occupation of Louisiana native people retained control of the river and indeed warred over it from time to time, catching Frenchmen sometimes in the crossfire.[2]

After the French and Indian War Natchez fell under British and then Spanish control, and continued to be seen in the same way, as a strategic site for control of the Mississippi. Native people protested the handover to Britain with an attack on the English convoy that first attempted to reconnoitre the river, but they made peace with the Spanish. Under Spanish rule Natchez became a town in the European sense for the first time, laid out on a Roman grid plan for the residences not of farmers, but of those who governed the settlement and provided its markets and other services. Yet the settlers in the hinterland were mostly English-speaking, the first being veterans of the Indian wars, followed by British loyalist refugees from the American Revolution.

During this period both Wilkinson's plans for connecting Natchez to a strategic trade of rebellious Kentuckians and Willing's notorious raid down the river showed how important a route the river remained.[3] As the French and Spanish finally withdrew in favor of the English-speaking Americans, the river maintained its importance as a trade route when cotton and sugar grew to dominate the economy of the region; thus when a war was fought over the complex issues of the servitude that founded that particular economic base, military control of the river became important once again, and gunboats warred on the river.[4] A few years ago drought brought the river so low that these same Civil War gunboats emerged from the mud, along with the skeletons of Pleistocene beasts, a sixteenth-century canoe, and riverboat wrecks emerged from the mud. When the barges that bear the products of the heartland

to the sea were halted, the entire country saw that the importance of the river continues as a highway for contemporary shipping.

Labor and Fertility

But goods and ideas did not just move in some disembodied way up and down the river. They were sent by people, and those people were able to send them because they had more than they needed to live, and were in control of this surplus which they used to maintain and increase their own well-being. This continuity in the differential of power is fundamental also to the character of the region, but the texture of life with respect to that inequality has changed drastically over time. Systematic inequality arose with agriculture, either through control of the land itself or through control of its products. We have seen that the agricultural chiefdoms of the region institutionalized great power in the beings of the Natchez Suns, who occupied regional ceremonial centers built by the labor of their people. Yet the Suns were not "urban" except in a special sense, nor did they own the land. Instead, they owned mindshare; they had a more- than-human part to play for their societies. The tribute they received from the commoners or "*puants*" was, at least in the early historic period, more or less voluntarily given—at least to the extent that a French observer tells us that the commoners considered moving away when the tribute requirements became too onerous (Le Page du Pratz 1758).[5] This tribute entered a regional "prestige-goods economy" where the capital it represented was more symbolic than material. The Suns trafficked not in wealth but in power, a significant part of it sacred.[6]

The culture of the Natchez chiefdom was not that of the Suns alone. Their prosperity was built on agriculture and hunting, managed by women and men respectively. The people lived in extended matrilineal households, in hamlets and farmsteads spread throughout the region. The land was not "owned" by anyone, but the matrilines controlled its use.

As Europeans came to settle they profited by the changes

that the native people had *already* wrought in the land. At first the French made moderate requests for farmland, but then they became greedy, and the violent Natchez response to the ignorant demand for a sacred site made "Natchez" such a byword for danger that nearly forty years had to pass before European farmers came again. When the British settlers did come, they were able to take advantage not only of the fields cleared by African hands for French indigo and tobacco, but of the Natchez fields that had also lain fallow all that time.[7]

Those who cultivated the land as the Europeans moved into the region did not have the option of moving away from those who enjoyed the fruits of their labors. Taken unwillingly from their homes in West Africa, perhaps marginally comforted or occasionally aided in escape by the familiarity of the river environment (said to resemble the Gambia), the black enslaved laborers of the French, Spanish, and antebellum American Natchez region could not simply withdraw their labor from the community. They were the means of production, and like the land they were *owned* by a new group of people with a new idea of the human relationship with the earth, people who brought from their homelands a concept of control and transformation that far exceeded what had yet been developed by native people. The land had to be made to produce a surplus, not of food for the consumption of the immediate community, but of commodities to be extracted for the ultimate economic benefit of countries beyond an ocean. It is well known that this enterprise was not particularly lucrative under the French and Spanish regimes, when tobacco and indigo were the only reliable cash crops. Indeed it was only with the introduction of cotton as a crop, of a successful means of ginning the cotton, and finally of the technique of routinized gang labor, that the region saw this new way of exploiting the earth pay off, though it was still articulated as a kind of internal mercantilism. In this connection it should be remarked that this success was predicated upon unrestricted access to the river for shipping: on American control of the whole river, which thus subsidized the enterprise of cotton culture and cotton slavery.[8]

Whatever else may have been warred over during the 1860s, the eradication of slavery was an ostensible goal of the struggle that brought gunboats onto the river again. Yet the result of that epic struggle did not in the long run significantly affect the status of laborers who in the end did not own the land, and did not thus control any of the means of production apart from their own labor. Unlike the native Natchez commoners, they still could not move away to occupy another part of land seen as the common heritage of the whole tribe, for the American conventions of landholding had parcelled up the eternal land and made access to it conditional on possession of surplus economic value. Unable to acquire land, former slaves often had to return as paid laborers or sharecroppers to work the same land for the benefit of the same people as before. Poverty replaced slavery as the agent of dependency and social death.[9]

There are other such signs of discontinuity in apparent continuity. We have seen that the mounds built by the Suns of late prehistory were not only meant to provide them with pompous living quarters but to lift them closer to the gods with whom they interceded for the people; in that sense they were "public" architecture. The great houses that symbolized the great prosperity of the "suns" of antebellum Natchez were instead most emphatically feudal manors, built by the labor not of people whose own good required such an investment, but of people who could never enjoy for themselves the good symbolized by it.

Continuities versus Discontinuities

So although there are large-scale processes that accord a degree of apparent continuity from the emergence of agriculture to the present, this continuity is a deceptive one, and the details of life in the region are not continuous at all. We have seen that the geographical advantages of Natchez—strategic location above and hence controlling one of the greatest rivers in the world—coincide with the richness of its resource base—soils brought from elsewhere through "natural" processes,

and the fossil (fuel) remnants of dead dinosaurs hidden under the earth—to make it a good place to live. The resource base has been so rich that once agriculture and its accompanying rhythm and division of labor developed, the work of less than the whole of the population was sufficient to support at least a few in other activities, and this remained true even after agriculture became only one source of wealth based on the land. The locational advantage has been so great that people living here have been able to extort value simply from the differential between living above Natchez and living below Natchez. These two principles, location and resources, have remained constant.

Yet the population has shifted significantly several times, and with those shifts have come important organizational discontinuities. Indian leaders, male and female, were first decimated by European diseases, then genocidally displaced by the geopolitical strategies of European males. The "commoners" who did the agricultural labor of the Natchez chiefdom, and who were free to move their farms too far for the tribute collector to bother, were displaced by Africans—some of them chiefs themselves—who were not free to move because they were held as chattel slaves, and their descendants remain economically enslaved. In the crossing of oceans and cultures, some literate European males were able to leverage their structural position in the world system of communication and knowledge in order to forge connections from Natchez to that system that ultimately benefitted them. The descendants of native Natchez people and African people to this day enjoy less favorable connections to that system.

Significant gender shifts can also be observed. Some female Suns were more powerful than their male counterparts, and even less exalted Natchez Indian women controlled the land that fed the nation. The European women who followed them on the land were in some instances, as they helped husbands and brothers pioneer as small farmers, significant contributors to the economies of their families. In early slaveholding conditions, African women too were able to work with a degree of independence; but as Europeans began to

prosper on the land and expand their slave owning with the planting of cotton, the situation changed for all these women. Enslaved African women were routinely raped and offered incentives to breed additional valuable slaves, while the European planters' wives became dependents in a patriarchal society that rewarded them for building their power on the careful control of sexual favors and guarantee of legitimacy. This guarantee of legitimacy survives today in the female trusteeship of the artfully stylized myth of antebellum Natchez seen by tourists.[10]

It is hard for people to look at their own societies and see them as other than "the way things should be" or nearly so: that is part of the definition of a society, that it *is* the adherence of its members to such beliefs. Thus it is easy for us to look to essentialist justifications for continuities in behavior just as we look to environmental determinist justifications for continuities in subsistence. But the whole history of the Natchez region shows us that just as greenhouses and the remains of dead dinosaurs allow us to produce food in the absence of good weather and fertile soil, so the specific inequalities bred by people taking advantage of geographical location and resource exploitation in the past have less to do with human nature than with historical contingency.

Just one example: the location of gambling casinos on inland waterways is based on a historical legal peculiarity (a technical definition of "navigable stream") that now amounts to a virtual reality and no longer has anything to do with communication. We could try to claim continuity—that gambling is a safety valve for the dissatisfactions fostered by serious differentials in power—and compare prehistoric stickball games and the lurid excesses of Natchez-under-the-Hill with the hopeful crowds searching for economic salvation at the slot machines; but in each of these cases the people involved are very different as to class, worldview, and aspiration, and in each case gambling itself plays a different role. The themes, dictated by location, resource base, and certain common human needs, may seem to be the same, but the performances are always as unique as the actors.

Notes

[1] This curt dismissal of Soto's claims is reported in the account of the expedition composed in Portugal and ostensibly drawn from the reminiscences of an anonymous Portuguese gentleman "of Elvas."

[2] The best overall account of the French colonial enterprise in Louisiana is the incomplete *Histoire de la Louisiane française* by Marcel Giraud, whose five volumes cover the period 1698-1731 (Giraud 1953-1967). Translations of the volumes are being published by the Louisiana State University Press; thus far the press has published volume 1 in 1974, 2 in 1993, and 5 in 1991. Giraud's work is excellently supplemented by Usner (1992). I have found Zitomersky (1992) particularly helpful.

[3] The best current overview of this period is Hoffman (1992). See also Nasatir (1968).

[4] See the popular overview by Miles (1994).

[5] The observation about the secessionist tendencies of Natchez commoners came from their most astute eighteenth-century observer, Antoine Simon le Page du Pratz.

[6] For the meaning of political inequality in southeastern Native American chiefdoms, see Barker and Pauketat (1992).

[7] For an emblematic microhistorical account of the social complexities of early British settlement in the region, see Morris (1995). Future work along these lines for Natchez is beginning to emerge from the California State University at Northridge seminar conducted by Professor Ronald L. F. Davis. It is to be hoped that in the future additional attention will be paid to the precolonial and colonial periods and their implications for the American occupation of the region.

[8] For African slavery under the colonial regimes, see Hall (1992).

[9] See Novak (1978) and Nieman (1994).

[10] See Clinton (1984) and Fox-Genovese (1988).

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